HAER NO.TN-21

JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM MEMORIAL BRIDGE Old State Route 13 spanning the Cumberland River Clarksville Montgomery County Tennessee

HAER TENN, 63-CLKSV, 5-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Department of the Interior
Southeast Region
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

## HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## John T. Cunningham Memorial Bridge

HAER No. TN-21

Location:

Spanning the Cumberland River on Old State Route 13 Clarksville \*\*\* Montgomery County, Tennessee

Date of Construction:

1922-1925

Builder/Designer:

Tennessee State Highway Department

Present Owner:

Jointly owned by:

City of Clarksville

City Hall

Clarksville, Tennessee

and

Montgomery County Government Clarksville, Tennessee

Present Use:

Vehicular bridge

Significance:

The Cunningham Bridge is an example of the K-truss, one of only two known to exist in Tennessee. The Cunningham Bridge also is historically significant as one of the first bridges built by the Tennessee State Highway Department. It was also the first major

federal aid bridge project in Tennessee.

Historian:

Martha Carver

Tennessee Department of Transportation

August 1985

Edited and

Transmitted by:

Jean P. Yearby, HAER, 1987

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The Cunningham Bridge, a 1922-25 through (high) steel truss bridge is located southwest of Clarksville in central Montgomery County. Although located on the edge of Clarksville, the fifth largest city in Tennessee, the bridge site itself is in a somewhat rural/residential area. The east end contains a viaduct over the flood plain and is adjacent to a city park. The west end terminates at a heavily wooded hillside on which is located the c. 1830 National Register property, Riverview. The bridge derives its significance from its engineering merits as an example of the relatively uncommon K-truss and from its role in the history of the Tennessee State Highway Department.

Building a bridge over the river in Clarksville was a major local event that had been promoted since the 1890s. Efforts for a new bridge led to the appointment of a committee in 1916 to investigate a new bridge at certain ferry crossings. By 1919, the State Highway Department (SHD) agreed to design and build the bridge at the site of the Old Gaiser's Ferry, with the county paying one-third of the total cost and providing the right-of-way.

By 1921, the county committee reported that all plans, specifications, and preliminary work had been completed. This committee described the bridge thus:

This bridge is to be one of the latest designs of modern structures and will be one of the largest undertakings in the State of Tennessee. 1

After approval of the plans by the War Department and the Federal Bureau of Public Roads, the county let the bridge work in 1922 in three contracts: the piers and approaches, the three main trusses, and the dirt fills at the end of the approaches.

Four bids were received for the work involved in the first phase, the substructure and concrete approaches, on July 14, 1922. The SHD's estimate was \$212,608.94 for this aspect of the project. The bids received were from Foster and Creighton of Nashville (\$220,261.19), Gould Contracting Company of Nashville (\$196,891.76), the Henley Construction Company of Louisville, Indiana (\$199,654.45), and the Union Bridge and Construction Company of Kansas City (\$254,242.45). The Gould Company's bid, as low bid, was selected.

Four bids for the work involved in the second phase, the three truss spans, were received on September 14, 1922. These bids were from the Gould Contracting Company of Nashville (\$88,904.97), the Nashville Bridge Company of Nashville (\$88,118.79), the Penn Bridge Company of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania (\$98,299.53) and the Virginia Bridge and Iron Company of Memphis (\$91,219.04). As low bidder, the Nashville Bridge Company received the contract. (There is no indication as to who received the contract for the third phase for dirt fill at the end of the approaches).

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The bridge was finally finished in 1925 for a cost of about \$700,000.\( \frac{3}{2} \) At the request of the Federation of Women's Clubs of Clarksville, a committee from the county court was appointed in 1926 to select a name for the bridge. It was decided to name the bridge, the John T. Cunningham Memorial Bridge. Cunningham's family had been notable businessmen in Clarksville since the early 1880s. Cunningham himself was a local politician who served as a state representative from 1905 until 1909 and as a Speaker of the Tennessee State Legislature from 1907 to 1909. He was also Judge of the Criminal Court and Judge of the County Court from 1918 until 1945.

Although the Cunningham Bridge was a major local concern, its primary historical significance is in its associations with the development of Tennessee's State Highway Department (SHD). In Tennessee, the SHD was formed in 1915. Although some federal money came into the State after the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act, it was not until after the SHD was reorganized in 1923 as the Department of Highways and Public Works that large sums of federal money resulted in a massive bridge building effort from 1927 until World War II. However, in the fledgling days of the SHD (roughly from 1915 to 1025), very few State bridge projects with or without federal funds were built. This is one of the early bridges constructed by the SHD and the first major Federal-Aid Project (No. 16) built in Tennessee.

The Cunningham Bridge also derives some significance from its engineering merits. First, its composition as well as its date of construction reflects the transitional role from county leadership to state leadership in bridge building. The Cunningham Bridge is a heavy, riveted Pratt derivation, while many contemporary county bridges were still lightweight, pin connected structures. Yet, those bridges erected after 1925 by the SHD are uniform in width, composition of members, and truss types. Even though far from similar to county bridges, the appearance of the Cunningham Bridge is also different from the post-1925 SHD bridges - the railing is different, it is much narrower, and the truss type (K-truss and a variation of the Warren truss) were not commonly used after the 1925 by the Tennessee State Highway Department.

However, the primary engineering significance of the bridge is related to the rarity of its main truss, the K-truss. This truss type was used for a short time in the early twentieth century. This truss type was not often used and relatively few examples remain. (In Tennessee, only two K-trusses have been inventoried.)

The Cunningham Bridge contains nineteen spans and is 1400.7 feet in length. The three river spans are riveted through steel truss spans. The main channel span is a 282.5 foot K-truss. Each flanking truss span is a modified Warren with polygonal top chord. On the western end of the bridge are three concrete arch girder spans, each 47.0 feet long. On the eastern end of the bridge are

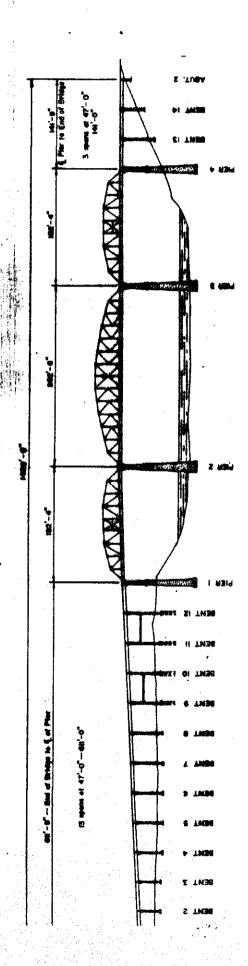
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thirteen concrete deck girder spans, each 47.0 feet long. The substructure is concrete. The composition of some members vary, but the descriptions below are generally true. The top chords and end posts are channels with lacing underneath and are connected with cover plates. The bottom chords are channels with lacing top and bottom. The posts are channels. The diagonals are small channels with lacing, and the counters are angles with battens. The curb-to-curb width is 18.0 feet, and the out-to-out width is 21.3 feet. The minimum vertical clearance is 14.0 feet. The K-truss is 42.0 feet at its tallest point and each flanking truss is 30 feet in height at its tallest point. On each truss, the height at the hip vertical 22.0 feet. Each truss span contains a lattice railing; the girder spans contain a spindle concrete railing. The only known alterations to the bridge occurred in 1961 when the portal bracing was raised. Overall, the bridge retains a high degree of integrity.

The information for this and other material in this report was acquired from the Montgomery County Court Minutes available at the State Archives. See Roll 49, Volume 35, pp. 190, 247; Roll 88, volume 1, p. 66; Roll 88, volume 2, pp. 209, 441-449, 569; Roll 89, volume 3, pp. 36, 92, 110, 123, 203, 223, 284, and 296.

Tennessee Highways and Public Works (Volume II, Number 4, October 1922), p. 23. However, Nashville Bridge Company contract #4137 indicates the bid was \$89,952.67 and that work was finished on September 30, 1925.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Smith Beach, Along the Warioto (Nashville: McQuiddy Press, 1964), p. 325.



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